

"IT'S EASIER TO BE GUILTY"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

September 26, 1982
Park Avenue United Methodist Church
New York, New York
17th Sunday of Pentecost

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INTRODUCTION

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DEVELOPMENT

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GORDON Liddy

For example, we see ourselves in Adam's excuses, "The woman you gave me"; or in Jacob, donning his little disguise in order to deceive his father and take the first step up the rung of financial success; or, in Saul - the moment he hears the chant go up from the crowd, "Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands". And doesn't Saul's jealousy mirror some of our own perversity?

And, of course, over in the New Testament we can see ourselves reflected in "promise-making, promise-breaking" Peter, or in the pathetic figure of the paralytic...quite literally scared stiff, or if you will, scared to death...his life one long suicide.

I WONDER...

STORY OF THE WOMAN

But can we see ourselves reflected in the New Testament lesson, in that story in St. Mark's Gospel which comes shortly after the story of the paralytic, the story of the woman who for twelve years was bleeding internally? You heard it read a few minutes ago. For twelve years this woman sought unsuccessfully a cure which makes it hard for us today not to believe that her illness wasn't in part emotional, particularly as in those days to hemorrhage in this fashion was thought to be unclean. So, we can say for 12 years, invisible in the public eye, she suffered her weakness, her secret guilt.

I think it would be fairly easy to say "of course we see ourselves reflected there". All of us have our secret guilts and they don't all stem from infantile fantasies either; rather they're a product of an adult understanding of reality. For it is perfectly true that we have fallen short as individuals, as parents, as partners, and as citizens we have strewn the countryside and the world with a few blunders. And the Lord knows that we fail often enough in our vocations and if we are women these days we may think that we are a failure because we do not have a vocation.

And because to an extraordinary degree we are our memories, that is, our memories shape us more than our genes, the memory of what we have done and what we have neglected to do, like this woman's hemorrhaging, has enormous secret power over us...draining our lives of joy and sapping them of vitality.

As I say, I think it would be fairly easy to say something like that. But to leave it at that would be to miss the point of the story.

POINT OF THE STORY

For this story is not about the woman's sickness, but rather it is about her cure. She hears what people are saying about Jesus. She says to herself, "If I touch even His clothes I shall be cured." And so she makes her way through the crowd pressing around Him, touches His clothes and instantly is well again.

WE'RE BLEEDING AND HURTING

Now I do not doubt that like this woman, all of us, shall we say, are bleeding and hurting. Nor do I doubt that most of us know it, although I think that you will agree with me that some of our wounds are so deep we neither know how nor want to examine them.

INCLINED TO

But what I suspect is that we can see ourselves reflected more in the crowd than in the woman. We are pressing around Jesus alright, in fact so much so that some people out there, like the disciple in the story, think we are actually touching Jesus. But He knows differently. No power has gone out of Him. He knows we are keeping our hands to ourselves. In short, unlike the woman, who — after all, despite many setbacks, for twelve years continued to seek a cure, we, after perhaps a comparable number of years have come to terms with our wounds. The wounds are now familiar. In fact, we are rather comfortable with them. Some of us have even learned how to coerce others with them. Having reached a truce with our own guilt, we now don't want to touch Christ.

We fear the cure more than the illness.

Have you ever heard yourself or anyone else say sentences something like the following:

"No...I think I'll just keep my mouth shut and endure my marital problems."

"Oh, some day I suppose I'll sit down and have a good long talk with the kids".

"I know my job is boring and certainly isn't useful to anyone, but I guess these days you're lucky to have any job at all."

"Too bad the rest of the world doesn't have America's wealth...but I guess we just have to hope for the best."

These sentences are symptoms of an advanced state of a disease recently called by Ashley Montague, "psychosclerosis" - a hardening, not of the arteries as in arteriosclerosis, but rather of the spirit. As a result, the mind cannot see and embrace new ideas, the heart cannot stay vulnerable. Sufferers of psychosclerosis deaden themselves against life in order to go on living. They sell their freedom as the price of their self-perpetuation. It is a very common disease and people who contact it are far from dumb. In fact, they are very smart. It is smart to fear the cure more than the illness.

Didn't the woman herself almost die of fright when she grasped what had happened? Isn't forgiveness terrifying? It may be hell to be guilty, but isn't it worse to be responsible, response-able, able to respond to the love of God?

GOD'S LOVE

God's love casts out fear. The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear. So faith means courage. Forgiveness means freedom. To be healed means to have the courage and freedom not to endure marital problems, that is easy; but to face and resolve them; to talk to the kids right now; perhaps to change jobs; and certainly to seek to redistribute the nation's wealth and power at home and abroad.

So why be healed when love is so costly? One reason is because it is so boring to be sick. Fearful people are boring people. Their fear of failure

makes them miss out on some of the best things in life. So they are boring to themselves, boring to others. And the same is true of guilt-ridden people. They are too driven, too self-pre-occupied to be fun. In fact, not to feel too badly about themselves they make sure they don't feel too good about anything. For them, life has no heights, no depths. It is all flattened out.

As someone has put it, the trick in life is to die young as late as possible. But sufferers of psychosclerosis, spiritually speaking, seek to die old as soon as possible. But life is too short to be boring. Furthermore, for Christians at least, it is dishonest to go on living in fear and guilt as if within our very reach the cure wasn't there. Reach out for it. Touch Him.

Some Christians love to berate non-believers. But to me the heresy of rejecting Christ is small potatoes compared to the heresy of remaking Christ into something He never was, still isn't, and never will be. And I think at times we commit that heresy. We cannot say we are Christians and pretend that Christ isn't a healer. He came precisely so that, like this woman, we might touch Him, that power might go out of Him and into us.

TWO POINTS MORE This is such a rich story that one could go on talking about it far too long. So let's note two points quickly and then head downstairs for refreshment and some healing fellowship.

While it is true that without Christ the woman could not have been healed, what the woman did she did entirely on her own. She didn't tell Him what she was going to do. She didn't ask Him for permission. She wasn't planning to tell Him afterwards what she had done. In other words, she made herself totally responsible for her own cure, which is why she was cured. That is to say, we are healed by God, but only when we chose to be healed. Note that Christ didn't say, "My power has healed you", but rather He said, "Your faith has cured you!" "Your faith". His power was there, but she had to want it, she had to take it, and as to take it took such courage, it is small wonder that He wheeled around to see who had touched Him.

And the second point is this: in St. Luke's version, after Jesus has turned around when the woman explains why she touched Him and how she had been cured instantly, in that sentence the Greek word for "crowd" changes to the word for "people" or community. By her willingness to become deeply human, this woman humanized all around her, changing a faceless multitude into a community of warm human beings. To touch Christ is to be put in touch with one another. His power is there, but we have to want it; we have to take it.

CLOSING God grant that there may be among us men and women of sufficient courage to do so and in so doing transform us all into a loving, caring community. This is the word of challenge I leave with you on this Homecoming Sunday - to each of you to inject as much of yourself into this church community that it may become once again a warm, loving, caring fellowship of people.

Sophocles said of Athens that it was people not stones. May the same be said of this Park Avenue United Methodist Church, set here in the heart of this great city of the world filled with many wonderful persons. Let us touch Christ and make this center of hope into a healing, loving, caring community of Christ-centered people. And may a touch of His faith cause great things to happen here in days to come.

canyons of concrete

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your spirit at work in these moments, O God.
Confirm within each of us the feelings of this high hour, for we
sense more deeply than we can express the beauty and wonder of Your love.

We pray that we may be truly open to your grace, to your mercy, to the
presence and power of Your spirit that each of us may be enabled to live the
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